

# Into the Gardens of Sweet Night

by Jay Lake

---

Copyright (C)2003 by Jay Lake

First published in L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future XIX, August 2003

Hugo Award Nominee, Writers of the Future Contest Winner, John W. Campbell Memorial Award Nominee

---

This story originally appeared as a first place winner in L. Ron Hubbard's *Writers of the Future, Volume XIX*, Galaxy Press, August, 2003. It is now on the 2004 Hugo ballot for Best Novelette. It was also my qualifying sale for placement on the 2004 John W. Campbell, Jr. Award for Best New Writer. "Into the Gardens of Sweet Night" was inspired by a dog named Binky, and by the boy I wish I could go back and be."—Jay Lake

---

*A Chance Meeting by Road*

"Penny for your thoughts, stranger."

Elroy glanced around. His mind had wandered as he followed his footsteps down the ancient metal highway. No one was in sight.

He felt a tug on the leg of his trousers.

"Down here, stranger. Fancy a Justiciary penny?" The voice was high, almost squeaky.

Elroy looked down. A tan pug dog with a black face and ears trotted on its foot paws next to him, one thumbed paw loosely caught in the muslin of his trousers at the level of his right knee. The pug wore a green flowered waistcoat.

At two meters in height, Elroy towered far over the Animal. "A Justy penny? Truly?"

"Spend 'em anywhere," said the pug with pride. The dog's brown eyes darted back and forth, while a long tongue licked its nose. Its curly little tail wagged quickly.

Considering the unmodified muzzle, Elroy thought the pug had a remarkably clear voice. It offered him the promised penny in its right thumbed paw. Without breaking his stride, Elroy leaned down and grasped the coin. He slipped it into his belt pouch. Justies spent anywhere, not like the various city scrips backed only by faithless reputations and threat of local violence.

Elroy was returning from a year-long spirit quest among the Little Brothers of High Impact in the Glass Mountains of Oklahoma. He was headed home to his family's little treetop cabin in the rain forest around Pilot Knob. Elroy wanted to climb lianas, gather bananas in the clearings, and hunt tamarin monkeys in the high forest canopy. He wanted to court a familiar girl, wed the old-fashioned way, and raise a family up in the trees as Texans always had. Which required funds, something he had in small supply after a year in a monastery. And he was still five hundred kilometers from home, a long lonely walk down the decrepit highway.

The pug tugged again at his trousers. "Well?"

“Animals.” Elroy shot a sidelong glance at the pug. “I am thinking about Animals.”

The pug sidestepped away, disappointment flashed in his canine eyes. His tail drooped. “I did not pay for an insult, friend.”

“You neither bought my friendship with a Justiciary penny, stranger,” snapped Elroy. “But I won't insult you. I said Animals, not beasts.”

“Your thoughts, then?” The pug growled and narrowed its eyes.

Elroy could see the pug's hackles rise above the collar of its waistcoat. He sighed, regretful for having mishandled the situation so quickly. “What is servant to a mounted man, peer to a footed man, and master to a legless man?”

The pug's hackles dropped back below its flowered collar. “A poor riddle, as you already gave me the answer. Scarcely worthy of my investment.”

Elroy slowed, stepping to the roadside next to a weathered sign that read “New Dallas 82 kmtr.s, Fresh Fruit next Left.”

“My deepest apologies, gentle pug.” Elroy recalled his school days and the whippings he routinely received from Master Stenslaw for inattention the finer points of law and social custom. “I am rarely approached under the terms of the Mutual Contract, and am unversed. I intended no offense.”

“None taken, I'm sure,” muttered the pug.

“Enough, then.” Elroy smiled. “I stop to dine. It's poor fare I have, but I offer it freely.”

The pug laughed, a strangled bark. Its tail flickered again. “I like generosity in the young. They are usually too callow to comprehend the value of a gift freely given. Let us instead repair to the fruit vendor ahead. In recognition of your kind offer to share your food, I will stand us a pair of kumquats, or whatever else they might have that suits.”

\* \* \* \*

### *A Dinner of Fruit in the Rainforests of Texas*

“Well, you're a couple of likely lads.” The old woman at the fruit stand smiled a gap-toothed smile.

“I am hardly a lad, good woman. Do not mistake my size for youth.” The pug drummed its claws on the edge of the old woman's table. “We will have two kumquats, and a liter of wine fit for consumption.”

“No kumquats today. Guavas three for a New Dallas dollar, I'm out of wine but you can have sweet plum jack two NewDees a liter,” she recited in a bored voice.

“Two Justies for the guavas and the plum jack,” the pug countered.

“Three.”

They bargained in a desultory manner, settling on two Justiciary pennies and a New Dallas dollar, which the pug handed over from the pocket of its waistcoat.

“Thank you, my good woman.” The pug stepped back from the table. “Get our supper, my boy.”

Elroy considered arguing that he was not, in any sense, the pug's boy. The smell of the guavas changed his mind, being far more appetizing than the stale bread crusts he had planned to eat. He took the three

guavas and the liter of plum jack, served with the loan of a translucent tube with white volumetric markings on the side, and followed the pug away from the fruit stand.

\* \* \* \*

They ate in the shadow of the glossy green leaves of a blooming mango tree. Elroy was grateful for the two guavas the pug had generously given him. They passed the plum jack back and forth swig for swig, although Elroy drank considerably more than the pug at each pass. The mango tree sat on a bluff above the highway, giving them an excellent view of several kilometers of the road. In the distance, a land train puffed dark smoke and light steam into the sky, while the heavy scent of the mango blossoms and the drone of insects lulled Elroy toward sleep.

“*Magnifera indica.*” The pug waved at the tree above them. “In Vedic tradition this tree symbolizes abundance and divine sweetness.” The pug grasped the tube of plum jack in both thumbed paws and gulped. “Alcohol is dangerous for small dogs,” the pug continued, panting. “Slows down their breathing, interferes with the central nervous system.”

The conversation worried Elroy. Animals were not beasts, and for the pug to refer to its base canine ancestry so casually violated a widespread taboo. The great projects of the Viridian Republic had long since vanished from history, save for Animals, who now labored in many of the occupations of the world. They carefully fashioned their succeeding generations in their own images, and were equally jealous of their heritage and the secrets of their kind. Elroy held his tongue, choosing silence over potential insult.

“Well,” the pug continued after a long pause, “a man who knows when to hold his thoughts.” It passed the plum jack to Elroy.

“I am a traveler far from home. It is trouble enough for me to know my own thoughts, let alone mind those of others.”

“A worthy attitude. Would that all were as wisely discreet.”

Elroy opted for tact. “Discretion is the better part of a man.”

The pug studied Elroy closely, licking its nose repeatedly as brown canine eyes scanned his face. “Are you heading home, or setting out?”

It was a question not asked in polite conversation. Elroy recognized the seriousness of the pug's request, gave consideration to its open-handedness with the guavas and the plum jack.

“Returning, sir pug, from a long course of spiritual study and physical pursuits.”

“Were you successful?”

Elroy shifted, uncomfortable but trapped by the pug's hospitality and the opening created by his own honest answer. One boy in every generation from his town of Pilot Knob boy was set out on the road to the Little Brothers. Some returned, some did not. Many who did became village hetmen in their time. Elroy felt no ambition to rule, but he had found balance, strength and a small measure of wisdom among the Little Brothers—qualities he recognized as desirable in a future leader. “Yes, I succeeded.”

“So your duties to faith and family have been fully discharged?”

“Yes. I am free, and bound for home.”

“Then I would offer you a post of service with me, for a time.” The Animal smoothed the front of its flowered waistcoat, showing more than reflexive nervousness. “My terms are generous, especially if we

meet with success in my ventures."

Elroy did not want to take service with the pug, to be distracted from home and finding a bride. On the other hand, starting a family took money, or at least resources. The pug's Justiciary penny had already doubled his savings, and having left the monastery, he was no longer a mendicant.

"What service, what terms, and what is the mark of success?"

The pug licked its nose. "I need a person of discretion and physical skill to assist me as a traveling companion and bodyguard. I offer expenses, board, and a Justiciary penny per day, plus substantial bonuses upon success of my own mission." The pug paused, plucked at its waistcoat as it stared forlornly at its foot paws. Its curled tail drooped. "I was a gardener, but have been lost to my work. I need help to find my way back into the Gardens of Sweet Night."

Elroy laughed in spite of himself, spraying plum jack on his crossed legs and the grass in front of him. "A child's bedtime tale," he said, coughing up more plum jack, "and one with which to frighten bullies and cowards. A thousand pardons, but your jest is in poor taste."

The pug drew itself to its full seventy centimeters. "I do not jest. I know the way back to the Gardens, but it is not a road that I can travel alone. I can see I have wasted my time here. Good day, sir man."

"Wait, wait." Elroy stretched a hand toward the pug, palm outward. "I can see that you are serious about this fable. How is it that you plan to return?"

"Well," the pug sniffed. "It is an arduous journey, hence my need for a traveling companion. I have offered you a position of trust to travel at my side, if you will trust me to know where I am going."

Elroy nodded. "Your funds will stand me good stead when I return home. It is not my ambition to be a servant, but I will accept your wage. I am a human man called Elroy, and I will take your service."

"Friend Elroy, I accept your offer of service under the terms discussed. I am an Animal called Wiggles."

Elroy was profoundly glad he had no more plum jack in his mouth as he swallowed another laugh.

\* \* \* \*

### *Somewhat Is Learned Concerning the Gardens*

They walked toward New Dallas the balance of that day before settling down to rest under a baobab tree on a sparsely vegetated plateau. "*Adansonia digitata*," Wiggles identified the tree. "The South African baobab. They grow in rain shadows and drylands, as they do not favor too much water. The tree is not native to the Western Hemisphere. We are lucky it is not in fruit—they are notoriously rank."

The trunk of the tree was broad, like a wooden silo ramified with exposed roots, spreading to a great crown high above their heads. "I've never seen one," said Elroy. Baobabs did not grow around Pilot Knob.

"They can store one hundred tons of water. In their native ecosystems they serve as reservoirs that anchor dryland ecosystems. There is one in Babylon much larger, but that is the nature of things there."

Elroy waited politely for the pug to continue.

Wiggles sighed. "Babylon, one of the Gardens of Sweet Night." He scratched in the loam at their feet, drawing seven long ovals like sausages laid end to end. He pointed to them in turn.

“Heligan, Babylon, Suzhou, Eden, Daisenin, Gethsemane and Tuileries.” His voice was sadness itself. “The green wealth of our Earth, captured and multiplied by the guiding genius of man and Animal.”

“And you came from there?”

Wiggles nodded, a very manlike gesture. “Born and raised in Heligan.”

“Why did you leave?”

The pug stared at Elroy, licking his own black face. “There was a misunderstanding. I was cast out for eating the apples of our Lord.”

“Your Lord?”

“Liasis, High Commissioner of the Cis-Lunar Justiciary and Lord of Implementation for the Atlantic Maritime Territories.”

Elroy had never heard of such a person. “Who is he?”

“The man who owns the world.”

\* \* \* \*

They watched the stars rise over the eastern horizon, the two of them stretched out together under the edge of the baobab's scattered branches. Venus came first, then Yurigrad, brightest of the thousand satellite stars, on its fast course through the sky.

“The stars shine like diamonds cold and hard in the skies that surround the Gardens,” said Wiggles in a sleepy voice.

“This Liasis...” Elroy struggled with the name. “How does he own the world?”

The pug's tail thumped against the ground. “Do you pay taxes at home?”

“Me, no, but the village of Pilot Knob tithes every third moon.”

Wiggles sat up, began grooming himself, tongue lapping through his fur. He stopped for a moment. “To whom does your village tithe?”

“The Travis Caldes.”

Wiggles burrowed briefly into his groin. “And to whom do they in turn pay taxes?”

Elroy recalled his lessons in civics and economics. “I suppose they must pay them to the Republican government in Waco.”

Another pause for air. “And to whom do the Republicans tithe?”

“I never imagined that they tithe anyone, sir pug. I did not know who might stand above them.”

“Everybody tithes, in one fashion or another. And it all flows upward, friend Elroy. Only the Lord Liasis does not tithe. He and a few of his brethren.”

“How can it be,” wondered Elroy, “that if I am a free man, everything is owed to someone of higher station?”

“What does freedom mean?” Wiggles turned around several times and went to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The warmth of the new day washed over them. The baobab lay some kilometers behind. Elroy considered his bread crusts with longing as Wiggles spoke.

"I believe I can find a maglev station to speed us on our way to New Dallas. We will have far to go from there."

Old tutelage in archaeoscience tumbled through Elroy's memory. "Maglev. Magnetic levitation, yes? An ancient mode of rapid transport."

"Correct." Wiggles smiled while licking his nose. "Normally subterranean. This system was originally developed near the end of the First North American Ascendancy. As I recall, the La Grangians reconditioned it."

"I had no idea it was still active."

"Many things move above your head and beneath your feet of which you have never dreamed."

The discussion of last night still weighed on Elroy's mind. "How free am I?"

Wiggles laughed again. "You breathe of your own choosing, yes?"

"Yes, I suppose that I am free to breathe."

"Some people dwell in places where that is a right, licensed and paid for every turning of the moon. Yet they consider themselves free."

Elroy was shocked. "Free? When they must pay for the very air they breathe?"

"Some claim there is absolute freedom in holding responsibility for every aspect of their lives, including the air they breathe. Every day they live or die by the consequences of their actions."

Behind them a shrill blast from a steam whistle warned of an oncoming land train. Elroy and Wiggles left the road to stand in the twinned shadows of a honeysuckle that struggled over slow years to overwhelm a banyan tree.

"*Ficus benghalensis*." Wiggles tapped a thick aerial root with a thumbed paw. "A relative of the mulberry, mistakenly thought by the ancients to be a fig tree. Another colonizer of these American shores. Traditionally, this tree represents shelter given by the gods, a symbol of their benevolence toward man."

The clanking, screeching land train overtook them, all brass piping, bright paintwork and great iron wheels. Elroy did not feel particularly sheltered.

\* \* \* \*

*Beset by Wolves, Any Man May Be a Hero*

The land train groaned to a shuddering stop before their banyan tree. The sixth and final car halted directly in front of Elroy and Wiggles. Three security wolves jumped over the red and yellow ironwork sides, surprising them. One slammed Elroy back against the banyan tree using a rough arm across his chest while another knocked Wiggles down to pin him under a foot paw.

The lead security wolf leaned one forearm against the banyan tree while tapping Elroy on the chest with his staff. The wolf was definitely male, as were his gray and tan fellows. They all wore black armored vests. He growled through a toothy smile. "You two pups are in our crimebase, Freshmeat." The odor of

his breath gagged Elroy.

Elroy was frightened, not for his life, but certainly for his safety, and that of Wiggles. Gathering his calm, he protested. "You don't even know our names. We have rights under the Mutual Contract."

"Rights." The lead wolf laughed, a very human sound. "I've heard of those." He leaned closer, the lolling tongue nearly swiping Elroy's nose.

"This little dog is a dangerous character, friend man. You'd do well to avoid his type." The wolf glanced down at Wiggles, squirming and whining on his back. "Breeding error, you know."

Elroy sized up the three wolves. Each stood taller than he, armed with iron-shod staves and stun guns. One was occupied standing on Wiggles, while the other two cornered Elroy against the aerial roots of the banyan. Bad odds, from a poor position, but he would not allow either fear or tactics to keep him from his responsibilities. His vows with the Little Brothers forbade attack, but defense was another matter entirely. Elroy centered himself as he had been taught, then drew a steady breath.

"Sir pug is my employer, and I owe him loyalty."

"Freshmeat, you don't listen well..." the security wolf began. Elroy spun a left snap kick that landed on the wolf's scrotum. Spinning through the kick, Elroy grabbed the staff as it tumbled from the shocked wolf's thumbed paw, following on to catch the next security wolf across the forearm.

The second wolf screamed as its ulna shattered. Elroy shoved the iron tip of the staff into the second wolf's chest, pushing it back into the banyan, before whacking the groaning first wolf alongside the head to keep it down. He turned to help Wiggles, only to see the pug with his jaws locked on the inner thigh of the third security wolf. That wolf shook Wiggles free and leapt on the pug, just as Elroy brought the staff down with a resounding thwack on the back of the wolf's head, pulling his blow so as not to kill.

Panting with adrenalin and relief, Elroy used the staff to lever the unconscious wolf off Wiggles.

"Sir pug, are you well?" he gasped.

"That bastard son of a beast smashed my phalanges," screeched Wiggles. "I fear I cannot walk, and more wolves are certain to come from the fore of the train."

It was terribly rare for a human to handle an Animal so, but Elroy scooped up the pug as his own breathing settled to a manageable rhythm. "Then this would be a fine time to remember where a maglev station might be."

He fled into the jungle, carrying the iron-shod staff in one hand and Wiggles in the other. Elroy mumbled a prayer of thanks that he had not maimed or killed the security wolves.

\* \* \* \*

They crouched in an understory deadfall on the jungle floor, listening for sounds of pursuit. The old rotted trunk was surrounded by large, flat leaves fallen from above, each the size of a serving platter. The leaves decayed with a gentle sugary smell.

Elroy's fear had been replaced by a rising sense of anger—at the situation, at the wolves, at Wiggles. "By the Cattle of the King, what was that ambush? My masters took my vow not to strike in anger, and already I am in default. I am paying dearly for your wage, sir pug."

"A moment, please," said Wiggles. "Allow me to collect my thoughts. You do fight very well for a peasant boy from the Texas jungles."

Elroy folded his hands and made a constrained bow within their sheltering greenery. "My spiritual masters practice an aggressively strenuous form of ethics. Now tell me, what brought the security wolves down on us?"

"Flaming Sword," said Wiggles. "The ones who cast me out. They guard the secrets of the Gardens of Sweet Night."

"The constabulary of your Lord Liasis?"

The pug drew himself to his feet with a groan. "The secret police, perhaps. Ancient tradition holds that a flaming sword bars the gates of the Garden of Eden, namesake of one of the Gardens of Sweet Night."

Elroy examined the staff. "I would expect the secret police to carry the fiercest of weapons."

"Not here, on the surface. It is forbidden by both common sense and the Mutual Contract. They expect no sharp resistance here. They will not make that mistake with us twice."

In the distance they heard the scream of the land train's steam whistle, long blasts in groups of three. Wiggles growled, his ears laid back flat. "They launch the search, as if we were dangerous brigands. Damned canids."

Elroy examined the jungle around them. His mind and body were calm again. "Well, then we must find your maglev station quickly. I presume it is hidden underground, or I would have heard of such a thing before." Elroy paused, working through his line of reasoning. "A maglev must use a lot of energy, and something that old would not be well shielded. Do you have a means of locating that kind of energy leakage?"

Wiggles looked surprised. "Excellent thinking, friend Elroy. You have been better tutored than I had hoped. I do have something like that, but to my embarrassment against all propriety you must again carry me. My foot paw pains me sorely."

Elroy scooped up the pug. "Show me the way." He trotted through the green-shadowed depths of the jungle floor, Elroy harboring regrets.

\* \* \* \*

"Ware tigers, friend Elroy." Wiggles' voice was muffled against Elroy's shoulder.

"Surely you mean wolves?"

"No, I scent felids. Large beasts, not Animals. I understand that *Panthera tigris sumatrae* have become naturalized here in Texas."

"A wonder to behold, I am sure," Elroy replied, wondering how Wiggles could scent the difference between a beast and an Animal, "but I am ill equipped to stand off something larger and less foolish than your flaming wolves."

"If a tiger appears, I am confident you will think of something."

This stretch of jungle floor looked much like any other to Elroy, with dangling lianas and scattered deadfalls. Butterflies strayed down from the high canopy, drifting through isolated shafts of green-tinted sunlight.

After a time Elroy voiced his thoughts. "Between the tigers and the wolves, I worry if we will emerge from this jungle intact."



“Regretful you took my pay?”

“No.” Elroy surprised himself. “The wolves attacked without warning, and offered no legal authority. Further, your money earns my way toward starting a family.”

“Surely a thought worth a Justiciary penny.” Wiggles gave another of his odd laughs. “Put me down here, please.” He began snuffling around on all fours in a spiraled circle in the loam, limping to favor in his left foot paw.

“Here.” Wiggles’ voice carried from behind another banyan tree. “Bring that stick you have been carrying.”

Elroy stepped around the tree to see Wiggles digging into the loam, scattering leaf mold and dirt behind him. He could hear Wiggles’ thumbed paws scraped on something solid. The pug backed out of the hole, then stared up at Elroy. Elroy noticed the flowered waistcoat was as clean as it had been when he first met Wiggles—a sign of smart matter, although Elroy had never actually encountered the stuff.

“Open it,” suggested Wiggles.

Elroy peered into the hole. A metal hatch cover lay exposed about eight inches below the jungle floor, a large handle inset within a rounded recess. Elroy reached down with the iron-shod staff, levering it against the handle. He leaned with all his strength.

The handle did not budge.

“Harder,” snapped Wiggles. Elroy noticed the pug's hackles were rising. He thought he could hear the distant echo of the steam whistle.

Elroy leaned against the staff, pulling with his entire weight, until his feet almost left the ground as the staff bent back.

The roar of a tiger startled him greatly.

The hatch handle screeched as it slid across the rounded recess. Elroy and the staff collapsed on Wiggles’ dirt pile as Wiggles bounded to the sprung hatch and tugged at it with his thumbed paws.

The tiger roared again.

Elroy grabbed the hatch, pulling it wide open as Wiggles dove down the hole. Elroy tossed the staff after Wiggles and swung himself into the hole to the sound of a startled yelp from below. As he pulled the hatch cover closed, he saw the green eyes and tufted face of a Sumatran tiger peering in at him.

Wiggles’ encouraging words echoed up from the darkness below. “Don't worry. It's the smallest species of tiger in the world.”

\* \* \* \*

### *A Magnetic Journey of Conscience to Flower Mound*

They stood in a dimly lit hall, high-ceilinged and quite large. The echoes of Elroy's feet scuffling on cracked tile carried some distance. The whole area had a musty, oily smell, overlaid with the cool damp common to subterranean spaces. Vague reddish light from hidden sources obscured much more than it revealed.

Wiggles thumped his tail. “Excellent.”

“Yes?”

“This was the Denton station. It is long out of commission as there is no town here anymore. The line still runs through it straight to our destination, however. I have already summoned a service car for a trip to Flower Mound, which you call New Dallas.”

“So this is the maglev,” whispered Elroy.

“Well, the station anyway. You will see the train soon enough.”

They waited on a concrete bench in the silent dimness. Wiggles whimpered periodically from the pain in his paw. After a while Elroy realized their mistake.

“What will happen when the wolves discover the hatch?”

“First they will discover the tiger, I suspect.” The pug snorted. “But in any case the dirt will have taken care of things by now. It isn't very bright, but it knows its job.”

“The dirt?” Elroy realized Wiggles was an absolute oracle of lost technology. “Was it nanotechnology?”

“Exactly. Moderately intelligent nanodirt. It is self-restoring. That's what I looked for. We use it in the Gardens of Sweet Night. I have a detector sensitive to its signature.”

When the maglev service car finally arrived, its running lights brightened the station. Elroy saw tall vaulted arches, cracked murals on the wall, and a row of long-shuttered shops. Tiny pairs of eyes gleamed in the shadows by the tunnel mouth.

The service car itself was an almost featureless polished wedge much different the steam-driven iron trains that Elroy had seen all his life, quiet as a stone. Elroy added disappointment to that day's catalog of emotions.

\* \* \* \*

“Flower Mound.” Wiggles stretched, shaking out his fur while licking his nose. “The lotus is a flower of great significance, symbolizing purity and divinity. These days people call this place New Dallas, but it is built on a most spiritual foundation.”

“It is only New Dallas, sir pug, not the Vatican Aresian.”

They stood in the Flower Mound maglev station. Similar in design to the abandoned Denton station, it was well lit, dressed stone walls bearing sculpted metal light fixtures. A tile mosaic floor supported scattered travelers seated on concrete benches or reading wall posters. The shops here were long-shuttered, too.

Elroy had left the iron-shod staff in the service car, as it seemed too conspicuous to carry through the station. He grumbled. “I walked all the way to the Glass Mountains while this world beneath could have carried me in comfort.”

“But you were free every step of the way, yes?”

More free than he was now, Elroy realized. “Are we much closer to the Gardens?”

“We are until the Flaming Sword picks up our trail,” said Wiggles darkly. “Those wolves had no reason to carry nanosensors out there, but it won't take them long to reason out where we went. We must move onward and upward. Support me by clapping my thumbed paw, please. It would be a scandal for me to

be seen riding in your arms."

Elroy extended a downward hand. "First, I suppose, we must find a way out of this station. Surely they do not employ a secret ladder here?"

\* \* \* \*

"I am embarrassed to say that I feel enslaved by your wages." Elroy clutched the two Justies the pug had just given him, filled with a sense that he had surrendered control of his fate.

Wiggles smiled. "Freedom. An ideal of some concern to you. Consider that the meanest felon digging a ditch in restitution to his lord is a free man. He may place his mattock thusly or so at his own choice, bend or stand as he wishes."

Elroy leapt to the flaw in Wiggles' proposition. "Yet he is in chains, undeniably bound, his actions constrained."

"Those chains are of his choosing," said Wiggles. "The felon chose his crime, with the ditch as consequence. When I offered you service, you chose to join me. The Justiciary pennies in your hand and the pangs in your conscience are consequences. You are of course at liberty to resume your original journey."

They sat on a bench in the Gamelan Garden, a park in the center of New Dallas, just off Simmons Road. Wiggles had demanded rest in a cultivated park. He had declared Gamelan with its orchids and fleshy vines and vast bromeliads the palest imitation of the Gardens of Sweet Night, but still balm for his injured soul.

Elroy shook his head, studying the coins in his hand. "I will stay." He did not want to admit it, but Elroy was becoming fond of Wiggles.

"Caring is a surrender of freedom. You may see that I am trapped by my love of the Gardens, that this lovely *Odontoglossum hortensiae* so reminds me of." The pug sniffed at a pale, fleshy flower, his tail wagging. "Flowers are the mothers of insects, you know."

"Did they name it Flower Mound for the orchids that grew here?"

"Goodness, no." Wiggles laughed, his tail slapping the bench. "In those bygone days, what grew here were dryland plants such as prairie grasses, pecans and mesquite."

At Elroy's puzzled look, Wiggles added, "You know. *Prosopis glandulosa*. A nitrogen-fixer that anchored the boundaries of prairie." The pug rubbed his left foot paw with a thumb paw. "My foot is sore hurt, friend Elroy."

\* \* \* \*

### *Speaking the Language of the Sky*

They stood in a line at the base of the mooring mast that towered above them, a slender blade of white metalloceramic stabbing into the sky toward the great bulk of the airship *Child of Crisis*. Elroy had seen dirigibles cruising above the trees all his life, as the usual airway from New Dallas to Monterey ran over Pilot Knob. He had never been close to one.

Elroy craned his neck to study the gondola at the bottom of the airship. It was doubtless quite large, but still appeared miniscule against the bulk of the gasbag. "I've never ridden the air before."

"To do so down here is of no comparison to the Gardens of Sweet Night."

“My experiences pale next to yours, sir pug,” Elroy snapped, “but leave me the joy of what little I have to call my own.”

“Peace, friend Elroy.” Wiggles squeezed Elroy's hand, his small thumb paw dry and stiff. “I did not mean to offend.”

“Next load! Group six!” A red-faced young woman, her skin much paler than Elroy's woody brown complexion, shouted from the boarding doors at the base of the mast.

Wiggles checked his chits. “Let's go.” The two of them shuffled through the hatch on to a small elevator with a number of other passengers. Behind them, Elroy saw the line of waiting people and Animals through the closing hatch.

The elevator hummed almost below audibility. Wiggles had warned Elroy about the sensation of being pushed down while the little car climbed the inside of the mooring mast. “I wish there were windows,” Elroy whispered.

The car suddenly lurched, shaking in its rise. From the conductor's shocked gasp, Elroy gathered this was not part of the usual ride. They stopped for a moment, then began moving up again.

A bulging man with a thick, burred Mississippian accent sounded panicky. “And what would that have been?”

The conductor picked up a small handset from her control panel and listened. The car shuddered upward, much less smooth in its motion than before. Elroy could hear a deep groaning through the walls of the elevator.

They staggered to a stop and the doors hissed open to reveal a tiled floor about waist high to Elroy. The conductor dropped her handset. “There is a problem down below. The airship is casting off for its own protection. Please remain calm and stay in the elevator car.”

“Flaming Sword,” whispered Elroy. If they stayed in the elevator, the wolves would come for them, endangering the other passengers. He had to get away, to protect himself and everyone else. Elroy scooped Wiggles up in his arms like a beast and pushed toward the open doors.

“Here there, boy.” The man with the Mississippian accent grabbed Elroy's arm. Elroy spun, swinging his elbow into the Mississippian's chest with a prayer for forgiveness. He had no time to reason with the man. Elroy miscalculated his blow and felt ribs crack.

“Moment of Inertia,” Elroy wept through clenched teeth. “May the Little Brothers forgive me.” He hopped one hip up onto the ledge that was the floor outside, and rolled out of the jammed elevator. The conductor plucked at his heel, but he ignored her.

The massive bulk of the *Child of Crisis* filled the sky above Elroy. Ahead of him it stretched into the distance, the shimmering metallic bulge of the airship's gasbag dropping below his view. The boarding platform at the top of the mast was about four meters square, while a slender spire arched up above him to meet a set of lines depending from the airship's nose. A narrow gangway about three meters long led to the open hatch of the gondola underslung along the forward curve of the airship.

Two sailors in crisp blue uniforms were unfastening the gangway from the open door, preparing to drop it loose. Wiggles whimpered as a series of explosions echoed up from the ground below. The platform swayed beneath Elroy's feet. There was no time for thought. He sprinted toward the gangway, screaming, “Wait, wait for us!”

One sailor looked up, the gangway's release chain slack in her hand. The other yanked his chain, causing the right side of the gangway to drop away from the hatch while the chains on the left took its full weight.

Elroy raced over the edge of the boarding platform onto the sagging gangway as the other sailor belatedly released her chain. Elroy pushed off as the gangway fell away, straining into the jump with Wiggles tucked firmly under his left arm. As he fell, Elroy reached forward with his right. It was like running the trees in his home jungle, only far more deadly.

The gangway tumbled away beneath his feet to swing from the boarding platform, revealing perhaps a hundred meters of empty air between Elroy and the flagged paving stones of the airfield. His fingers missed the hatch coaming, then grasped at the swinging chain as the second sailor hauled it in. Elroy caught the chain, but his body swung forward with the momentum of his jump and smashed against the gondola wall. Wiggles yelped, muffled by his arm.

As Elroy swung back on the chain, spinning over the airfield, he saw the boarding platform falling away from him. He realized the dirigible had cast off and now rose into the sky. People from the elevator were helping the bulky Mississippian on to the platform, while the conductor waved her fist at Elroy. Far below, he could see a fire at the base of the mooring mast, with figures struggling around it.

"Need a bit of help there, lad?" The female sailor peered down at him. Elroy spun slowly on the chain, grateful of the support wrapped around his forearm, even as the pressure of his weight threatened to crush his wrist within the chain's tightening grip. The two sailors peered from the open hatch above him.

"If you please," gasped Elroy. He wondered what the warm, acrid smell was, then realized he had pissed his pants.

"We'd need to see a boarding chit." The two of them grinned like monkeys sharing an armload of rotten papayas.

"A thousand pardons." Elroy shuddered. "I am somewhat constrained at the moment." He slipped two links down the chain, the length circling his wrist binding tighter. He could feel bones grind against one another. Elroy hissed with pain.

The woman pulled a serious face, rubbing her chin. "A right problem there, lad. Rules say we have to see the chit afore you can pass the hatch."

"Ancient law, that is," the second sailor added. "Protects everyone's rights, that does."

They both laughed.

Wiggles squirmed beneath his arm. "Money. Offer them money."

Elroy's hand slipped, and he felt an astonishing pain as his elbow threatened to come loose in its socket, counterpoint to the grinding in his wrist.

He clenched his teeth. "Perhaps a gratuity would be in order."

"Now you're speaking the language of the sky, lad." The two sailors hauled in their chain.

\* \* \* \*

"Despite the irregularities of your embarkation, your boarding chits seem to be in order."

Elroy's wrist throbbed so severely that he had trouble focusing on the purser's words. They stood in the officer's abbreviated workspace in a forward cabin of the airship.

The purser was an aging golden retriever wearing a blue jacket with epaulettes. Its fur was braided in tight cornrows, each one clasped by a clip decorated with an ancient copper coin. It stared at Elroy and Wiggles as if they were unpleasantly spoiled cargo loaded by some error. "It seems I am stuck with you for now. What transpired back there at New Dallas?"

Wiggles glanced sidelong at Elroy, who took that as a hint.

"Sir purser," Elroy began. He was not sure what he should say, but he had brought them aboard the ship. He felt the way he had when summoned before the abbot for some infraction. "I am in service to this noble pug. We were chased by brigands. We thought to escape by boarding the *Child of Crisis*, but they were closer than we realized. My most humble apologies for bringing risk upon your vessel."

"Brigands," said the purser flatly. It stared at Elroy, its large brown eyes sweeping up and down his grimy beaded vest and torn muslin trousers. It then turned its gaze on Wiggles, whose green flowered waistcoat was, as always, immaculate.

"I may be a foolish old Animal who has spent his life among the free folk of the air, but I know brigands when I don't see them. Those were security wolves, firing indiscriminately down there with heavy weapons." It glanced at their boarding chits. "You two are fully paid and bound for Odessa Port. I've a mind to have you both tossed from the hatch to save me further trouble, but it's a fact that the Air Charter protects *Child of Crisis* and all her passengers and crew from precisely this harassment. Now tell me what you're really about."

Wiggles scratched his ear, then licked his nose. His tail stayed tight to his body as he spoke. "My servant and I are pursuing a quest."

"And that quest would be?"

Wiggles spoke with a quiet, proud strength. "Through error, I have been cast out of the Gardens of Sweet Night. I now make my way home."

The purser studied them a moment. "In their common room up against the belly of the gasbag, air sailors tell stories of those who die in the wide arms of the sky. Every man and Animal longs for a peaceful death in the air, followed by a sky burial. What we—they—say is that the bodies rise up singing into the heavens, until they come to the Gardens of Sweet Night. That is where they find their reward." It laughed, a stuttering bark deeper and richer than Wiggles' wheezing moments of humor. "Somehow you do not seem like one who has returned from the dark clouds of death."

"It is but truth, friend Purser. My story is as real as the Gardens themselves, for all that they may be myth to some."

"I do know more than the simple sailors."

"If you know the world," said Elroy unexpectedly, "you know injustice." He surprised himself with his words. "We have been pursued with a vengeance out of all proportion to any offense. You have your Air Charter. We have only our wits and our luck. I beseech your help in surpassing this wicked pursuit and gain entrance to the Gardens?"

"You speak well for a servant," said the purser, "As it happens, I have conceived of a way to lend a hand, spite the security wolves, and keep the *Child* from multiplying her current difficulties, all in one stroke. If I can persuade the captain to spite those who trespass on our ancient rights we may throw you from the hatch after all. Would you care to experience a sky burial of your very own?"

\* \* \* \*

## *Rise Up Singing*

The crew common room was low and dark, with a convex ceiling following the swell of the gasbag. Elroy, at two meters of height, could stand only along the slant walled sides where the ceiling reached up to about the top of his head. Long and narrow, with no windows and poor lighting, it felt to Elroy like the sarcophagus of some giant from prehistoric America.

"You effected our rescue quite well," said Wiggles.

Elroy snorted. "I assaulted an innocent man, then leapt into empty air, to be saved by dumb luck and a long chain."

"You saw what needed doing, and did it."

"Perhaps. But not now. What *are* we doing here?"

Wiggles rested in the hammock with Elroy, curled up against his side. One of the sailors had cleaned and bandaged his wounded foot paw, but the pain clearly bothered the pug.

"Hiding from passengers who will certainly be questioned at Odessa Port by the Flaming Sword. For the same reason the captain, too, cannot afford to see our faces."

"I know. I wondered about the sky burial. I am afraid of being tossed from the hatch."

"They will cast us out in a sort of flyer that is used to send out the dead. We will not plummet to the ground, but rather be rescued by secret friends."

Elroy still did not trust what was to come, but he had trouble imagining such an elaborate effort would be expended just to kill him. It couldn't be any worse than his leap onto the airship.

\* \* \* \*

Elroy kept a wary distance from his rescuers, Nero and Mycroft, in the little storeroom where they were supposedly preparing his body. "You are *not* tying me to those splints. That's no flyer."

"Here, there," Nero said. "Your funeral is in ten minutes. You don't want to be late for it."

"Elroy," snapped Wiggles. "We do not have time for this."

"Look." Nero displayed a small bone-handled knife. "For later. To cut your way out. Trust us, you'll feel like a new man after your funeral."

Elroy stepped over to the splints. They were body length, cross-braced to a large capsule of a dull-colored matte plastic. Nero had given him a blue uniform jacket, without epaulettes, while Mycroft stood by with a winding sheet for the 'corpse.'

"Wiggles..." Elroy began. Control of his situation kept slipping further away from him.

The Animal licked his own nose, then grasped Elroy's hand with a thumbed paw. "We must, friend Elroy. This will work."

Elroy lay down with the greatest reluctance and allowed Nero to bind him to the splints. The straps came across his upper arms, leaving his forearms free from the elbow down—not restraints, exactly. Nero slipped the bone-handled knife into Elroy's right hand. Wiggles crawled between Elroy's legs, where he was enclosed in the winding sheet that Mycroft wrapped from Elroy's feet to his waist. The sheet was some sandpapery weave of sackcloth cheaply printed with block patterns of birds soaring among blazing

stars.

“Oh are you in for a treat. While we're in the cargo hold, try to remember you're dead,” Mycroft whispered in Elroy's ear. “Don't breathe where the passengers might see you.”

Nero and Mycroft hoisted the splint ends and carried Elroy as if on a stretcher into the aft cargo hold of the *Child of Crisis*. Eyes slitted open, Elroy could see through his lashes an honor guard of four sailors to one side of the great double doors of the aft cargo hatch. Two of them played a fast-paced dirge on an electric sackbut and an out-of-tune finger harp. The musical effect was unique in Elroy's experience.

The purser stood in front of the hatch doors with a small book in its hand. Nero and Mycroft lowered Elroy onto the deck, the capsule beneath the splints taking his weight. Elroy could hear a rustle of people behind his head, presumably passengers and crew in attendance of his funeral rites.

“Crew, passengers, the ship our mother,” intoned the purser. “I beseech all to draw near and take comfort.” It made vague motions with the book in its thumbed paws.

“In accordance with the rules of the Air Charter first granted us by the counselors of La Segunda Republica Norteamericana in years of lost history, and further in accordance with the timeless rites of the Brotherhood of the Sky, we gather today to commit to a sky burial the mortal remains of able airman third class Vulpen, born of the airship *Fortune's Enemy*, and in service on the *Child of Crisis* since his seventh year. As our customs dictate, the remains of airman Vulpen will be cast out into the air for a sky burial, that his soul might guide him upward to the Gardens of Sweet Night where he may find his eternal reward.”

Elroy moaned, very quietly. He was supposed to cut the bonds with the knife in his hand, but where was the promised flyer? Elroy began to sweat.

The purser continued. “The Captain has taken us up above the clouds so that airman Vulpen's soul may rise up singing into the glorious light of the day star, bearing his mortal remains to that which awaits him. As I open the hatch doors, I ask everyone to bow their heads in respect for the dead.”

“You're on,” Mycroft stage-whispered. Through his slitted lids, Elroy watched two of the honor guard crank open the hatch doors while the other two wheezed and tootled their way through some airmen's paean. A sharp draft of very cold air swirled in as Mycroft added, “Don't cut too soon, friend.”

Mycroft and Nero ran forward, dragging Elroy with them. The purser's smiling face flashed by with a wink and a pained squeal from the electronic sackbut, then Elroy launched into the air.

He described a long arc down from the airship, screaming with every gram of his strength as the rumpled clouds below him grew larger and larger.

\* \* \* \*

### *In the Belly of the Orange Balloon*

A crack like the snapping of a mighty tree trunk interrupted Elroy's prolonged terror. Within the winding sheet, Wiggles nipped at his calves.

Their free fall pulled abruptly short, slamming Elroy into the straps that held his body. The one across his shoulders slipped to his neck, nearly strangling him as it bruised his larynx. Improbably, he still held on to the knife.

His fall turned into a gentle trembling flight above the clouds. Elroy lay face down, pulled against the straps by his own weight. Wiggles struggled against the winding sheet, threatening to break through and



resume his own, independent fall.

Elroy found his voice well enough to snap at Wiggles. "Stop moving, sir pug." To his surprise, he was no longer screaming.

Elroy craned his neck, trying to look over his shoulder. Above him to each side was a large, orange fabric wing with jointed skeletal ribs, like the wings of the flying foxes of his home forest in Pilot Knob. Elroy heard a steady hissing noise distinct from the flapping of the air across the fabric wings.

"Something is happening."

"What?" demanded Wiggles, who had wrapped all four paws around Elroy's left leg.

"We are no longer falling, and something is hissing above us, between our new wings."

"This is the whole point of a sky burial." Wiggles' voice was muffled by Elroy's legs and the winding sheet. "We're in an orbital drop-up pod."

"This is the flyer?"

"Yes. It flies to orbit. We're heading back to the Gardens."

Elroy watched as a great balloon slowly spun itself into being around them.

\* \* \* \*

They sat on the floor of the balloon, propping the splints across its inner curve for something to lean against. Opaque, about five meters in diameter, the balloon enveloped them in a diffuse orange light leached from the sunny sky outside.

Elroy had used the knife to cut them away from the splints. He then carefully tucked it in the pocket of his uniform jacket. His wrist, strained from their embarkation of the dirigible, caused him excruciating pain. Seeking something else on which to focus, Elroy noticed that the inside of the balloon carried a sharp chemical odor, redolent of freshly milled plastic with a metal undertone.

Wiggles watched Elroy sniff. "Nanotrace is what you smell. You know, that knife won't harm this balloon."

"Neither will it harm me, now that I have put it away, sir pug." Elroy hugged his legs. He was cold, shivering, and he felt very lost.

"You have lost your nerve. You suffer from shock, I think." Wiggles scooted next to Elroy, curled his small body against Elroy's side.

"Nerve?" Elroy tried to laugh, succeeding only in producing a dry cough. "I will never have nerve again. The Green Man help me if I ever so much as hop from a log. I want to go home."

"You are going home. We're going back to the Gardens. They are the true home of every person, balm for the soul and liniment for the body."

"A plague on your Gardens." Elroy stifled a sob. "I nearly fell to both our deaths in New Dallas, then again just now. We are floating through the sky in an orange bubble, I am hungry but my stomach threatens never to take food again, and I have to piss somewhere in this empty ball. I miss my quiet treehouse in Pilot Knob. I have had enough of your quest."

Wiggles was silent for a while, his tail thumping gently against the fabric of the balloon. Elroy heaved and

choked through tearless sobs, burying his face in his knees. After a time he stopped, only to stare at his orange tinted hands.

"You're going to the sky, Elroy," Wiggles finally said. "You will walk in the Gardens of Sweet Night and learn the true meaning of wonder."

"I'd *like* to learn the true meaning of a hole to piss in."

"Just urinate on the fabric of the balloon. It's very smart. It will carry the urine away and break it down for raw materials."

\* \* \* \*

"Why does the waist of the balloon sometimes flatten widely, then contract to a ball again?" Elroy had been watching the orange walls for quite some time.

"I believe it makes more, then less of an airfoil."

"Airfoil..." Elroy mused. "That means wing, right?"

"Yes, friend Elroy. A lifting body." They were again curled together at the bottom of the balloon. The purser, or perhaps the sailors, had thoughtfully included a package of supplies at the back of the stretcher. Elroy ate sparingly of a waxed packet of airship flat bread. He had no great desire to see what the skin of the balloon might do with his shit. The urine processing had been sufficiently alarming.

"The balloon," the pug continued, "rides air currents and thermals to the highest altitude it can reach in that manner. It is a very clever machine, in its limited way. Once it decides it will profit no further from soaring the middle atmosphere, it will commence a steady low-power jet burn fueled by conversion of atmospheric gases. We will feel that as a slow push downward. At some point, when it has gained sufficient altitude from that procedure, somewhere in the upper atmosphere, the final motor, a flat fission device, will boost us into low orbit. The process can take several days, but it is quite efficient, and therefore cheap. Especially as the balloon is reusable."

Elroy shook his head, straining to believe. "Orbit. In space around our Earth."

"Yes. In the high places, where the Gardens of Sweet Night sweep forever about the mother world."

\* \* \* \*

Wiggles made Elroy don the flimsy silver suit he found in the purser's package. There was a smaller suit, more of a bag with a head at one end, for Wiggles. The pug explained. "Survival suits. Simple space suits, really, although quite dumb for space equipment. Now that we are boosting toward orbit the balloon cannot protect us from the extreme cold."

"They cannot possibly bury their dead in the air this way," said Elroy. "This technology is costly and complex."

"Senior officers are sent off this way. Crewmen such as the late airman Vulpen are normally sent out the hatch with a small sounding balloon, enough to keep them in the air for a few days."

"I have never found a dead airman on the ground."

"How many airmen die each day? How big is the ground? I also would imagine the Brotherhood of the Sky is considerate of where they perform their rites."

Elroy mused on the Brotherhood of the Sky. "Now, *they* were free."

“Free because they travel about?”

“Yes.” He imagined life on an airship, seeing the great cities of the world from high above, immune to wars, to floods and fires, avoiding famines and pestilence.

“It is unlikely Nero or Mycroft have ever set foot on soil. Remember how high the mooring mast was in New Dallas?”

“I assumed it was a safety measure.”

Wiggles shook his head, licking his nose. “The Air Charter was written to cover aerial operations of ground-based organizations. Now, the airships are in perpetual flight. If they were to land, and the Justiciary could catch them on the ground, the crews would forfeit property and freedom. Born in the air, they are citizens of nowhere and tithed to no one. They have no rights at all on the ground.”

“So they are free, but not to walk the forests or swim the rivers.”

“Free within their domain, but absolutely restricted to it.”

Elroy thought about the massive bulk of the *Child of Crisis*. “If the airships never touch the ground, where are they built?”

“In orbit, where different laws and regulations apply. The airships are built in space, and lowered with massive orbital drop-down pods, analogous to orbital drop-up pods like this one.”

“So they pay for their ships by smuggling goods or funds back to space in these orbital drop-up pods.”

Wiggles barked his short, odd laugh. “I appreciate a young man with a keen grasp of economics.”

“They must bury a lot of officers. Some of them many times over.”

“I am given to understand their death rate is uncommonly high at times,” Wiggles said in his most serious voice.

\* \* \* \*

### *Nighttime in the Light of the Day Star*

The heavier thrust finally eased. Elroy felt himself floating off of the floor of the balloon. He and Wiggles both wore the thin silver suits, enclosing even their heads, the hoods having transparent panels across the face. Elroy tried to move, but instead began to spin. His head began to spin with the roiling in his gut.

Wiggles’ voice echoed tinny and thin within Elroy’s silver hood. “Have a care, friend Elroy. We are in microgravity, often called weightlessness. It can be dangerous and distressing to a newcomer.”

Elroy grabbed for a splint, but succeeded only in knocking it into a spin as well. He needed to talk, to focus his mind on something other than the distress of his body. “We have been in this balloon for two or three days, sir pug. I am very tired of the view, no offense. What happens now?”

Wiggles wagged his short tail, visible by the rippling in his silver space suit. “Friends of the purser will come for us soon.”

“Does it ever happen that the Flaming Sword or other agents of the Lord Liasis find these drop-up pods?”

“Yes.”

\* \* \* \*

Elroy had been thinking about Wiggles, about the wages he took and the choices that had been forced upon him. The balloon shuddered, and he found himself pressed against the fabric of the balloon. Elroy realized that the pain in his wrist had subsided quite a bit.

Wiggles kicked off, sailing in his silver suit to be next to Elroy. "We have been taken in tow. Let us hope for friends."

"How will we know?"

"Friends will stow the balloon gently for future use. Enemies most likely will force their way in."

"Wiggles," said Elroy. "When we are released, by friend or foe, I will stand with you, but I will be your servant no longer."

Wiggles gave Elroy a long, thoughtful look. "Why?"

"I am not made for service. I do not need the funds so badly as to surrender myself. Since we boarded the airship, every choice has been taken from my hands. I will stand beside you and help you get back to the Gardens, not for payment, but for friendship."

"Thank you, Elroy. I hope you can leave your regrets behind as we continue."

Pressed against the fabric with Wiggles, Elroy watched for signs of civilized entry.

They came soon enough. The balloon suddenly stopped. Elroy and Wiggles collapsed to the new floor that had been the wall at their back, drawn down again as if they were back on the ground. The orange fabric rapidly lost tension as it settled around them. With a gentle sussing noise it began to tighten in on itself.

One of the fabric panels split open above them, the rangy brindled face of a badger peering in. It wore a canvas work vest. "Ho, new friends. Is there cargo to be recovered?"

Wiggles unsealed his silver hood, motioning Elroy to do the same. As his hood opened, Wiggles spoke. "We are a special shipment, sir badger, courtesy of the *Child of Crisis*."

"Always looking out for us up here in the high places, that Renton. A great purser and a better person, but can't resist sending us little surprises from time to time." The badger pushed and nudged at the collapsing fabric of the balloon to open an exit for them.

"I am Wiggles, a gardener from the high places, and this is my friend Elroy of Pilot Knob, Earth."

The badger nodded gravely at Elroy. "Pilot Knob is a place I've never heard of, but coming in this pod you've visitor's rights. Be welcome. And you, sir Wiggles. Are you truly just a simple gardener?"

"With respect, I decline the question pending further discussion, sir badger."

"Which says enough about the special shipment. You may call me Horace. We must go now. By virtue of the method of your arrival, you have been summoned to a Concilium meeting."

They stepped out of the shrinking balloon into a large bay reminiscent of the rear cargo bay of the *Child of Crisis*, except everything here was ceramic, plastic or metal. Elroy was fascinated by the profusion of colored pipes, thick cables, and cabinets, with small doors and cunning hatches everywhere.

Horace led them to a hatch two meters tall, obviously intended for human foot traffic. Elroy paused to

look at a small glass panel the left of the door. He stared at the tiny lights that crawled across the panel until the great blue arc of the Earth swung into his view.

"Welcome to space," said Wiggles.

Elroy reached out to touch the panel. It was cold. He felt his sense of wonder unfolding like flowers in the spring. "Why does the man who owns the world live up here high above?"

Wiggles barked a soft laugh. "Where else would you find such a view?"

The badger tugged at Elroy's silver sleeve, urging him along.

\* \* \* \*

They passed through several short, winding corridors, lined with the same riot of pipes, cables, and access hatches as the cargo bay. To Elroy's nose the place smelled painfully clean. It had an aseptic, neutral scent impossible to achieve in an organic environment. Horace stopped them outside a double hatch emblazoned with a stylized paw print.

"Here is the Concilium. I counsel respectful attention, and the best kind of honesty in answering their questions."

The doors hissed open before them. At a gentle push from Horace, Elroy and Wiggles stepped into the room.

Elroy gasped. For a panicked moment, he thought he had stepped into open space. The Concilial chamber was roofed with a transparent dome, eight meters in diameter and open to half the sky. The great blue and white arc of the planet Earth was nowhere to be seen, but the room was flooded with the light of the sun, the daystar. All around his head, Elroy could see stars great and small, many of them in motion, like Yurigrad seen from Earth.

He pulled his gaze from the sky to the Concilium. Various seated and standing about a low, round table almost three meters across, eight Animals stared at him. There were no human people in the room except for Elroy. He saw four dogs of varying breeds, including another pug, as well as a raccoon, two coyotes and a puma that bulked large along one arc of the room. As with every Animal, all wore a single item of clothing to symbolize their work or rank. Every vest or jacket or waistcoat was as unnaturally clean as the one Wiggles wore.

The Concilium pug leaned forward, drumming its claws on the metal tabletop. "Wiggles."

"Clement," Wiggles acknowledged. Elroy glanced down to see Wiggles sag his shoulders, tail drooping.

"A gardener, indeed." Clement's voice oozed reproach. "Who had you hoped to deceive?"

"I *am* a gardener, Clement."

"And a great deal more besides. In light of your misdeeds, our Lord Liasis is much inflamed with hope of hearing news of you."

"You are free Animals here." Wiggles turned his head, staring from one Conciliator to another. "Liasis is not Lord of places such as this. The Mutual Contract does not hold sway above the soil of Earth."

The puma rumbled a low growl. Elroy had never seen such a large Animal. It was greater in size and apparent ferocity than even the security wolves. "Clement misspoke. Liasis is not our Lord, but he is yours, sir Wiggles. We are good neighbors, and seek to satisfy his reasonable requirements."

Wiggles nodded. "In return for reasonable rewards, perhaps, friend puma?"

The puma licked a thumbed paw. "It is the way of things, little dog. Your sun now sets."

Clement stared up at Elroy. "You, friend Elroy, are free to go. Horace will escort you to the airlock."

Wiggles waved Elroy back with a small gesture of one thumbed paw. Elroy reached out to touch Wiggles, thinking perhaps to pull him along. The badger grabbed Elroy's hand, whispering, "Come quickly, man, while they still allow."

The doors of the Concilial chamber began to hiss shut upon Elroy's view of Wiggle's green-clad back. Beyond his friend the pug, Elroy saw the puma rising and turning to come toward Wiggles. Wiggles' head was bowed, his tail almost slack in its unkinked dejection, as the paw print doors closed.

\* \* \* \*

Horace led Elroy rapidly through a series of cluttered corridors. Elroy stalked behind the badger, angry and confused.

"By the Moment of Inertia, what was that business? I will not allow a friend to be so betrayed!"

"Peace, friend Elroy. The Concilium is constrained."

"But that—Clement, Clement *knew* Wiggles. It said a few choice words, and Wiggles just stood there. After all we went through to come this far."

The badger stopped, turned to face Elroy, staring up at his human height. "Clement and Wiggles are littermates. Each chose a different path in life. Wiggles has deviated from his path, and Clement seeks to right perceived wrongs."

Littermates? "This is about the apples in the gardens then? A touch of brotherly jealousy?"

"You know nothing of what happens here in the high places, man from Earth, let alone the Gardens of Sweet Night. Wiggles was chancellor to Lord Liasis—a high official of the Justiciary in his own right."

Chancellor? Elroy leaned back against the corridor wall, pipes pressing into him. His worldview shifted underneath him like the falling gangway above New Dallas. He had no conception of what he should do next.

Horace tapped a claw upward into Elroy's chest, emphasizing his next words. "The Concilium was threatened, challenged for orbital rights and various alleged violations of law and charter. Wiggles worked secretly to defend Clement's interests, tried to make things smooth. In doing so, he betrayed the trust of his Lord Liasis. Fear of Liasis was stronger than loyalty to his brother, so Clement reported Wiggles to the Flaming Sword. From this came his fall."

"For brother to betray brother..."

"*You* have an appointment with the airlock. The Concilium has declared you free to go."

\* \* \* \*

### *Stepping Into the Sunlit Dark*

Horace led Elroy to a man-sized hatch set in a wide spot in a corridor. Another window stood next to it, showing the lights of the stars, both moving and still.

"Here is the airlock you should use, friend Elroy."

Elroy stared out the window. "What is out there?"

"Space."

"I mean, where I am I going?"

"Space."

Elroy sputtered. "That's ridiculous. I would die."

The badger pushed a button, causing the hatch to open. "Then it is a lucky thing that you seem to be wearing a space suit. I should seal my hood were I you."

Elroy considered fighting the badger, rebelling against the order, but to what point? It was the Concilium's home, they certainly had security to deal with him. He would only harm Horace, who had been kind. With a sigh, Elroy stepped into the small room behind the airlock, pulling the silver hood back over his head.

"This is it? I am just to step out into the sun-drenched dark to die? I have come all this distance to meet my end? This is senseless."

Horace gave him a long look that seemed almost sympathetic. "There is a deeper game in play here. Trust that you will be alone, but not friendless."

Elroy watched the hatch slide closed as he sealed his hood. The soft silver suit crinkled around him, expanding and tightening in different places at the same time as a hissing sound began, first as almost a roar before trailing off to nothing. The floor released its hold on him, and Elroy drifted slightly away from it. He felt the same absence of direction they had felt in the drop-up pod.

Weightless, Elroy kicked his way out of the other end of the open airlock, into the depths of orbital space. It seemed expected of him.

\* \* \* \*

I have finally found true freedom, thought Elroy. I am free of everything. Free of weight, free of responsibility, free of action of any kind.

Elroy's experiences in the orange balloon helped him keep his stomach and his mind anchored in place as he spun gently away from the rambling assemblage of the Concilium's high place in the sky.

He had never asked what their charter was, whose Council they were. Perhaps they spoke for all the Animals. He wondered what Horace had meant by deeper games. The business in the Concilium chamber had seemed almost rehearsed, a play perhaps. Who was being fooled? Wiggles? Elroy himself?

Earth rolled by his vision, transiting like a drunken giant. He noticed two kinds of stars, the sharp, far ones that didn't move except as he did, and the blobby, bright ones that moved at many speeds in many directions. The moving group must be the satellite stars, places such as Yurigrad. Perhaps they were other high places, or other adventurers like himself. Elroy felt his pulse echo in his ear. He was very, very far from Pilot Knob. The sunlit face of Earth showed the far side of the planet, so he could not even find his home.

"I suppose I shall die here," he said aloud as he began again to pray for the harm he done, to the security wolves and the unfortunate Mississippian. He prayed for the family he would never have, and prayed for Wiggles.

Horace's voice echoed in his ears, from inside the silver hood. "Not if you listen to what I tell you."

Suit radio, Elroy realized. "You have interrupted me at prayer, sir badger. Are we playing your deeper game now?"

"There is little time," snapped the badger. "Many things are not right at the moment, and you would do well to listen. I can help you help Wiggles. That great oaf Alcindor the puma even now sets out to return friend pug to his angry master. Can you see our station?"

Elroy waited with a smile for the Conciliatory home to spin into view.

"Yes, I see it now."

"Watch for a departure. Alcindor is about to set out in a maintenance sled with Wiggles. I have gained control of his autolaunch processes. I will direct the sled to pass very close to you. It will trail a line. You must grasp that line and secure yourself to the sled."

Elroy's smile broadened as the station rolled away from his view. The importance of everything diminished like a rock down a well. "Perhaps I shall grasp a shooting star as it trails by, friend Horace. I thank you for your kindness."

He yawned, a great gape that threatened to enclose his nearly dreaming mind.

"Sparks and fire," swore the badger. "Your oxygen is running low. Listen, friend Elroy, attend quickly. This is a maintenance sled. There are consumable service points at the base of the sled body. If you warp yourself in along the line, you may be able to steal air from its service reserves. I can intercept his telemetry and feed false data to keep Alcindor from wondering about the wallow from your added mass. Find the sled, steal air, and ride it in pursuit."

Elroy hummed, then sang. "I shall steal thunder from the storm and fly with the lightning."

In his ears, Horace sounded sad. "Good-bye, friend man. I have tried. Luck to you."

Elroy watched the blue Earth spin slowly by, thrilled by the patterns of the clouds.

\* \* \* \*

"Now, Elroy, now!"

He couldn't remember the voice, couldn't see anyone, but as Elroy blinked he saw a silver line swinging toward him. Like swinging down the lianas of his jungle home, he thought, although he could see no green. His ears told him that he was falling, so he grabbed the silver liana to stop himself.

Black spots moved before Elroy's eyes, obscuring his view of the dark beyond. The silver vine yanked at his wrist, renewing an old, forgotten pain, but it restored his sense of upwardness. He looked at his feet, seeing a great house of metal far below, impossibly shaped and larger than any estate had a right to be.

The Concilium.

Elroy remembered a dog named Wiggles, a friend and boon companion. Wiggles was in trouble, needed Elroy's help.

Elroy climbed the silver vine, noting that it lacked leaves. He wondered why he was surrounded by the night, above, behind and below him. After a while the vine ended in an irregular wall of metal. There seemed to be an inordinate number of small cubes, pipes and metal balls. Elroy grabbed a sturdy pipe,



releasing his silver vine.

In front him, Elroy found a row of taps, little serrated cones topped with colored handles. Each colored handle was labeled—‘N2H4’ was red, ‘H2’ was orange. A blue tap handle read ‘H2O.’

He needed air. H2O was water. H2 was hydrogen. His vision began to black out as Elroy found a white tap handle labeled ‘O2.’ Air, or at least oxygen.

He turned the white tap handle. Pale fog jetted out of the tip below the handle, disappearing almost immediately into a crystal spray, which then vanished. Air, apparently, but how was he to breathe it?

Elroy's stomach felt tight, as dark and uninterested as his mind was becoming, but he fingered the closure of the silver hood. Elroy could imagine the effects of vacuum on his skin and eyes. So first he tried to kiss the tap through his silver hood. To his surprise, the hood slipped onto the tap, pulling his face right up to the maintenance sled.

He turned the tap, feeling the jet of gas swelling his hood and pushing into his mouth with a sensation like drinking from a well-shaken bottle of ale. The black spots in his vision went away and Elroy began to giggle. His ears thrummed.

Elroy felt very alive, very fine, sliding among the tiny stars.

\* \* \* \*

### *Into the Gardens of Sweet Night*

“Wake up, boy.”

The smell was natural, like real air. Elroy knew that he wasn't in the Concilium's high place any more. He could smell soil, plants, open water. And close by, the musky scent of large canids.

Elroy opened his eyes. A tall, lanky human, with skin as pale as a jungle puffball, leaned over him. Two security wolves flanked the man, clad in armored vests and carrying matte black energy pistols gleaming with tiny colored status lights. One of the wolves leaned over to stare into Elroy's face. “Will he survive?”

“There may be some residual effects from the oxygen overdose.” The pale man stood up, favoring Elroy with a sad smile as he turned to leave the room.

“Won't matter much longer.” Both wolves laughed, full human sounding laughs through their long toothy jaws. “Come on, boy, it's time for your confession.”

They pulled Elroy to his feet, almost dropping him to the floor as he slid off the exam table. Elroy stumbled with them, a thumbed paw gripping each of his arms far too tightly.

“Where are we?”

“Heligan.” The wolf to his left snickered. “Some of us will live to enjoy it.”

Heligan. One of the Gardens of Sweet Night. Elroy looked around as the wolves yanked him into a corridor. The hallway was carpeted and paneled with dark hardwoods, like the public halls of the monastery of the Little Brothers of High Impact. Nothing at all like the metal burrows of the Concilium.

“Where are the plants?” He stared at the wooden walls with brass hand grabs punctuating them.

The security wolves laughed again, both relaxing their grip as they walked. The left one, the apparent spokesman, flexed the claws of his thumbed paw into Elroy's arm, puncturing skin even through the silver

suit. Elroy could feel blood welling inside his sleeve.

“You’ll be seeing them from inside the soil soon enough. Our Lord Liasis likes the freshest fertilizer.”

The time had come for defense, Elroy realized. The vows he had taken, then broken in Wiggles’ service, would never require him to go meekly to his death.

The knife was still in his jacket pocket, unreachable beneath the silver space suit. Elroy found his center, as he had learned in the Glass Mountains of Oklahoma. His perception of time stretched, each footfall on the carpeted floor like the slowest of drumbeats.

If he accepted a ragged wound in his right arm from the clawed grasp of his captor, he could bring that arm at full swing across the chest of the wolf to his left, while moving his left hand still inside the other wolf’s grip to close both hands in the rib smashing technique the Little Brothers called “Kitten and Ball.” He had learned at the land train that security wolves could be fought like men.

The Little Brothers taught that plan was thought, thought was action, action was deed. Elroy slumped to the left, then spun on that heel into the grip of the lead wolf. He pulled his right arm against the loose set of the right hand wolf’s claws, gaining the painful ragged wound he expected, joining its pain to that of his bruised bones.

Increasing his spin, Elroy brought his right arm across the chest of the wolf, twisting his body so the flat of his left hand could provide counterpressure to the coming blow. With a crunch of collapsing ribs, the surprised wolf faltered in his step, allowing Elroy to break free on that side and spin around.

As the injured wolf fell, his partner swung the black energy pistol up to fire it at Elroy. Elroy finished his spin, slipping into a snap kick that threw the energy pistol upward in the grip of the second wolf. Shoulder first, Elroy slammed into the second wolf’s chest as a violet bolt of light struck the wooden ceiling of the hall. The wood above him charred as Elroy drove the wolf back into the wall. Elroy grabbed the wolf’s armored vest at the left lapel, using it to slam the wolf against the wall.

The vest slipped off the wolf’s torso and down its arm as the Animal spun. Elroy fell away, surprised, clutching the vest so that it was ripped entirely off the security wolf. His momentum carried him to carpeted floor, next to the weakly kicking foot paws of the first wolf. As fire alarms screamed above his head, Elroy tensed for a counterstrike from the second wolf.

It slumped against the wall, whining and whimpering. Elroy saw a braided silver strand dangling down its back, emerging from the fur at a point several vertebrae below the joining of neck and shoulder. He flipped the vest over in his hand.

Torn silver filaments on the inner side of the vest matched the strand. The wolf muttered, dropped to all fours and began to stagger away, gun, vest, and Elroy forgotten.

Elroy shrugged on the vest, which fit him loosely, then grabbed one of the energy pistols. The first wolf rolled to look up at him as Elroy aimed the pistol at its head.

“You will never escape my Lord Liasis.” The security wolf grinned through pained gasps. Elroy could barely hear him over the din of the alarms.

“I don’t plan to.” Unwilling to pull the trigger, to kill a weakened enemy, Elroy reversed the energy pistol. He smashed the butt into the side of the wolf’s head. It slumped onto the carpet, still breathing.

Elroy left the other security wolf’s vest alone. He walked down the hall past the wolf’s creeping, whining fellow, humming a battle hymn from the Little Brothers in counterpoint to the whooping fire alarms.

He wondered how to find Wiggles.

\* \* \* \*

Elroy ducked through several hatches until he found a maintenance closet in which to rest. He had begun to tremble in the aftermath of the fight. The whooping fire alarms were an increasingly distant wail, and Elroy had the cold sweats.

He laid his energy pistol against one of the lockers in the closet, rested his hands on his knees and took a deep, shuddering breath. He had trained with the Little Brothers to acquire focus and strength, not to render Animals into beasts.

“Detachments moving within fifty meters,” whispered a flat voice from his collar.

Elroy jumped, slamming his head against a locker. He twisted around, seeing the bunched silver hood of his suit overlaying the paneled black of the armor vest.

“Do you wish to evade?” It was the voice inside his hood again.

“Horace? Wiggles?”

“Status unknown.” There was a brief crackling noise. “Tactical interface feed is being conducted through your suit communications.”

Elroy felt a sharp prickle of fear. “Are you the vest?”

“Cognitive prosthetic, canid, combat, model one seventeen *bis*.”

Robust technology, thought Elroy. It made sense. Every Animal he had ever seen wore a single item of clothing on their upper body. Elroy had always thought it was to emphasize their differentiation from beasts. With the size of most of their brain cases, Animals must store portions of their consciousness in these things.

“I want to find Liasis,” he said. Where Liasis was, he would find Wiggles as well.

The vest whispered, “Exit this locker, proceed twelve meters to your left and pause. I will direct you from there.”

Elroy grabbed his pistol, stepped out of the hatch and proceeded twelve meters to his left.

\* \* \* \*

The vest guided him down corridors and through access tubes that climbed up and down. As the vest tracked the location of wandering security wolves, it told Elroy to make sudden pauses, and sometimes changed instructions even as he moved.

Elroy thought to ask it if he was visible to other vests.

“This unit has a tracer function.”

How strange that the other security wolves had not yet used it to track him. Elroy was beginning to feel very set up. “Can you turn it off?”

“Disable tracer is a priority four order. Do you have priority four authority?”

Wiggles. Wiggles was supposedly Chancellor, or had been. “Chancellor Wiggles ordered me to help him.”

"Tracer disabled."

Wiggles, it seemed, still had a name to conjure with.

"What else can you do?"

"Level one help is available. Options are: armor characteristics, biometrics, canid interface, cognitive extension, external communications, maintenance, memory and storage, miscellaneous settings, product specifications, shielding, smart matter, stealth, tactical support, weapons interfacing, user preferences. Please specify your desired path."

Elroy sighed. It was far more complex a technology menu than he had time to deal with. "Never mind. Just keep telling me how to find Liasis."

"Wait thirty-five seconds, then open the hatch to your right and proceed downward two levels."

Elroy counted to thirty-five, then opened the hatch.

\* \* \* \*

The vest whispered through his open hood. "Once you exit this service tunnel, proceed left thirty meters and you will be before Liasis' audience chamber. Enter the chamber and you will be free to proceed to target."

Elroy was moved by an impulse he couldn't define, rooted in a vague belief that anything that spoke must have desires of its own. "I don't need to take you in there."

"Where else would I go?"

"I could take you off, leave you here. You would be safe, free." Even as he said it, Elroy felt foolish.

The vest made the static noise again, several times in a row. Elroy wondered if that was its thinking noise or its laughing noise.

"I am a cognitive combat prosthetic. I am an item of clothing for an Animal. What does freedom mean to me?"

"You know enough to ask that question," Elroy pointed out.

More static, then silence. Elroy waited, listening for noises behind the door. He heard none.

"There are four security wolves in front of Liasis' chamber," the vest finally whispered. "If you are prepared, you can overwhelm them with your energy pistol."

"And you?"

"I will come. If you win free again, I will still be with you."

"I'm not going to make it, am I?"

"In order to avoid panic dysfunction I have disabled my risk assessment functions. However, it is obvious that you should commence operations immediately."

More wolves, wolves he would certainly have to kill. Elroy already had too much blood on his hands for the sake of Wiggles. Having come this far, he could see little point in turning back. Elroy said a brief prayer for those about to die. He checked the charge on the energy pistol, placed his finger on the firing

stud, and palmed open the service hatch.

\* \* \* \*

### *Welcome Into the Presence of the Lord*

Elroy stood before a great pair of double doors. They were carved each from a single brass-bound slab of teak four meters tall, decorated with complex motifs of twining leaves. The grand hall where he stood was littered with the burnt corpses of four security wolves. Part of the carpet was on fire. He mildly regretted the flash burns on the glorious doors. Three different kinds of alarms wailed in the distance.

Elroy raised a spacesuit-clad foot and kicked open the right hand door.

Like the chamber of the Animal's Concilium, the audience chamber of Lord Liasis was transparently roofed. Elroy stepped forward then stopped, his eyes drawn up by a green glare.

There were no stars, no depths of space above him. Instead, a network of greenery rose, curving out in two directions to meet in the sky high over his head, extending unguessably far in its long axis. It had to be at least two or three kilometers to the far side of the green sky. Adrenaline rush of combat forgotten, Elroy stared into the infinite life of plants.

He was accustomed to the riot of the green jungles of Texas, lianas and giant ferns and glossy dark-leaved orchids in the lower reaches, punctuating the echoing silences of the deep forest, while high above in the middle layers and the canopy a violent profusion of epiphytic and parasitic plants hosted butterflies, monkeys, insects, birds and animals of all descriptions. His home tree in Pilot Knob stood amid a roaring chaos of viridian life, changeless in its endless cycle of destruction and renewal.

The Heligan Garden was a different order of nature altogether. Elroy's energy pistol dropped to point toward the carpet as he stared up at roses, ivy, yew, boxwood and a thousand plants for which he had no name. In all their shades and color they grew in glorious array, relieved by paths and walls and smooth rolled meadows, interspersed with pleasaunces and statuary and cunning ponds whose banks had clearly been laid stone by stone at the direction of generations of master craftsmen.

An overpowering scent of green, tame and orderly but powerful, swept through him. Elroy realized Lord Liasis' audience chamber roof was not transparent. It was absent. The room was open to kilometers of the most cultivated garden in existence.

"Just one of my seven gardens. Admittedly, perhaps the finest."

Elroy picked up his pistol, turned to look at Lord Liasis. The High Commissioner of the Cis-Lunar Justiciary and Lord of Implementation for the Atlantic Maritime Territories was a thin man, slightly shorter than Elroy's two meters, with flowing white hair. His eyes were a piercing shade of green, and his smile had a natural bonhomie. Clad in a blue morning suit, he carried a glass of wine in his right hand.

Wiggles stood next to Lord Liasis, looking down at his feet and smoothing his flowered green waistcoat with his thumbed paws. Elroy thought Wiggles' tail wagged.

Behind them the audience chamber stretched for several hundred meters, unroofed in glorious green and carpeted in burgundy and gold. There was no furniture save a wooden throne against the distant wall.

"What of the apples of your Lord?" Elroy asked in a soft voice.

"My gardens have many trees." Liasis' smile stretched to a toothsome grin. "Some bear strange fruit."

"And your tale, sir pug?"

Wiggles looked up at Elroy. "True, as far as it went. Not the entire truth."

Elroy stroked the trigger of the energy pistol. The vest whispered risks and priorities in his ear, but he ignored it. "What would be the entire truth?"

Liasis' smile dropped away as he spoke, his voice mild and his tone almost bemused. "One legacy of the La Grangian restoration is a strong prohibition against hereditary power. The Secretaries-General taught them that lesson. When a man ascends to a position of great responsibilities, there is a certain, ah, physical price that must be paid."

"Some do cheat," Wiggles added, "but it is frowned upon. There are no children, normally."

"I have need of a young man, a human, of compassion and strength, wit and ruthlessness. I have strong preference that he not spring from the Great Families of the high places, so as to be free of our politics and alliances. Lord Deimos offered a younger nephew, but the eventual price would have been far too high."

"My home is in a tree in the jungles of Texas, with the family I hope to establish. I have no wish to meddle in the business of the Lords of the High Places."

Liasis gestured with the wine glass. "Would you care for some? From Scandinavia's finest vineyards. Orbital wine is never quite the same, you know."

"Elroy." Wiggles' voice was earnest. "Let me be plain. I was sent to travel among the people of Earth, to find and test a worthy successor from outside the circles of the ruling classes. I required a young man who would bring no untoward ambition with him into the Gardens of Sweet Night. You are the one success I encountered—capable, thoughtful, ethical and strong. At my recommendation, and on the strength of your journey here, Lord Liasis now seeks you for his heir, to train and mentor that you might someday become a Lord of space."

Elroy shook his head. "What a strange way to choose an heir. Had you asked me to come here and be a gardener, I might have rejoiced." He laid the pistol down on the carpet, careful to point it away from the Lord Liasis and his chancellor.

"Had you brought me here and shown me the curve of the blue Earth and your wondrous Gardens, offering me dominion in exchange for loyalty freely given, I might have rejoiced. Instead, at your behest, I have beaten, wounded and killed, staining my soul with blood. I made an Animal into a beast. Four wolves lie dead outside your very door, other men and Animals maimed and wounded along the way. My vows are broken, lives have been ruined or taken, all for your little game." Elroy dropped the vest to the carpet.

Lord Liasis' voice was gentle. "No. Not for a game. For dominion over the kingdoms of the Earth and the high places. A small price to pay for proof of your fitness to succeed me. We test those outside the pale because it is the only true way to find new blood."

Elroy began to strip off the silver space suit. "Lord, in taking service with Chancellor Wiggles, I sold my freedom and made choices to do things I regret. Acting on my own I would not so much as kill a man to take an apple from him. Why would I kill for something as foolish as dominion over the kingdoms of the Earth? All I ever wanted was to start a family—the very thing you would deny me even with all your proffered riches."

Elroy dropped the space suit, then tossed the purser's coat onto the carpet, followed by Nero's knife and his carefully hoarded pay. He turned to walk away, stopping before the door to look back at Liasis and

Wiggles once more.

“The world, Elroy,” whispered Liasis, spreading an open hand. “I can give you the world, and these gardens in the sky. What greater gift is there?”

“Lord Liasis, dominion is a hard sentence to serve. My greater gift to myself is that I choose to remain free. I leave your service as I entered it.”

“Many wolves wait outside,” said Wiggles. The pug's tone was both hopeful and sad.

“I know.” Elroy looked up one last time at the Heligan Garden, breathed in the peaceful scent of green, then opened the door to walk out free and unafraid.

---

Visit [www.Fictionwise.com](http://www.Fictionwise.com) for information on additional titles by this and other great authors.